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Central Intelligence Agency



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## DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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The USSR and the Coup in South Yemen:  
Power Politics in the Third World

Summary

Although the USSR appears to have had little direct control over the recent coup in South Yemen, Moscow's actions over the past year played a key role in the crisis and its outcome. The Soviets were responsible for the return to Aden in 1985 of Abd Al-Fatah Ismail, who was a foe of deposed leader Ali Nasir Muhammed Hasani. After the rebels gained the upper hand, they provided direct military assistance to rebel forces that sympathized with Ismail's opposition to Hasani's loyalists. Throughout the crisis, the Soviets brought pressure to bear on the Ethiopian and North Yemeni leadership to try to prevent any delivery of military assistance to loyalist forces. Soviet mediation efforts aimed at reconciling the rebels and some Hasani loyalists. [redacted]

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When the coup began, the Soviets temporized initially but eventually weighed in on the side of the rebel forces; Moscow's tactical military steps were not decisive in the outcome but appeared to coincide with the victory of the radical Marxist forces. At no stage of the crisis did the Soviets appear

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genuinely concerned with saving Hasani's position. Soviet actions may have prevented protracted bloodletting in South Yemen, but Moscow must now decipher the political obscurity of the current South Yemeni leadership. [redacted]

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The Soviets clearly decided at the outset of the crisis that they would take steps to protect their long-term stake in South Yemen regardless of the consequences for an ally such as Hasani or the implications for Moscow's broader regional goals. But Moscow's involvement in South Yemeni factionalism has created concerns in the capitals of all of South Yemen's neighbors--both radical and conservative. [redacted] reaction of these states, including such Soviet clients as Mengistu, has been negative and Libyan President Qadhafi is supplying arms to Hasani's loyalist forces. Soviet tactics will also contribute to the weakening of the Yemeni Socialist Party, which Moscow helped to establish in the late 1970s and the creation of opportunities for US diplomatic maneuvering in North Yemen and Oman. [redacted]

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#### The Soviet Stake in South Yemen

The tenacity of Moscow's effort to maintain influence in South Yemen derives from Soviet interest in the Arabian peninsula and in the strategic sea lanes of the Middle East. Impoverished and backward, South Yemen has no natural resources of interest to a superpower, and its military strength is marginal. But Aden's geographic location--particularly its frontier with Saudi Arabia, its proximity to Ethiopia, and its position on the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb--renders it a strategic asset and a facet in any broader effort to gain influence in the littoral states along the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Indeed, the pattern of Soviet diplomacy in the Third World over the past twenty years points to an extensive and persistent effort to gain a major presence on the Red Sea waterway. [redacted]

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Since the withdrawal of British military aid in 1968, South Yemen has pursued radical and militant policies and has shown a strong ideological commitment to Moscow. It is the only Marxist state in the Middle East. Its close relationship with Moscow has allowed the USSR to build up its access to facilities in the PDY and has made the PDY entirely dependent on the Soviets for its military capability. Under Ali Nasir Muhammed al-Hasani, Aden had been pursuing a more flexible foreign policy in recent years, including rapprochement with North Yemen and Oman. This policy basically suited the Soviets as it added credibility to their own

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overtures to moderate Arab countries, which have led to the recent establishment of relations with Oman and the United Arab Emirates. At the same time, Moscow wanted to ensure that Aden's policies not detract from its dependence on the USSR. [redacted]

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PDRY's armed forces are entirely equipped by the USSR, military deliveries totaled nearly \$250 million in 1985. Before the recent upheaval, there were around 1,500 Soviet military advisers in South Yemen as well as 550 civilians who were largely technical and training personnel, including a significant number of advisers working in the Aden government. When the fighting started, about 4,000 Soviets--including diplomatic personnel and dependents--were evacuated to Djibouti; since the fighting ended, some have returned. The USSR also provides at least half of all PDRY's development assistance from external sources, with disbursements currently running at \$150-200 million a year (compared with a GNP of about \$800 million). [redacted]

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In return, the Soviet Indian Ocean squadron makes use of Aden for rest and replenishment. Two Soviet naval reconnaissance aircraft (IL-38s) are based at the PDRY military airfield of Al-Anad. The squadron and naval aircraft are primarily engaged in maintaining surveillance on US naval activities in the Indian Ocean, but are also available for such other duties as calls by naval vessels at the Seychelles in support of President Kene when his regime appeared to be in jeopardy. [redacted]

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[redacted] Aden provides transit rights for Soviet aircraft en route to Ethiopia, Mozambique, and other African points; the Soviets also support their heavy regional merchant and fishing traffic in the region from South Yemen. The entire operation is an important counter to the US position on Diego Garcia and the French role in Djibouti, and covers the Soviet presence in Ethiopia. [redacted]

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### The Soviet Role in the South Yemen Conflict

The timing of Moscow's maneuvering during the crisis strongly suggests that the USSR initially temporized but that, as soon as the Soviets believed the rebels could win, they weighed in on the side of the rebel forces. Indeed, Soviet actions shortly after fighting began pointed to a view that a rebel

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victory was the inevitable and maybe even the preferred outcome. There was no indication that the USSR believed that preserving Hasani's political legitimacy was important to the Soviet stake in the PDRY. Such Soviet behavior was consistent with past speculation that Moscow had orchestrated Ismail's return to Aden last year in order to put pressure on Hasani to maintain a pro-Soviet orientation. [REDACTED]

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Soviet involvement in the recent South Yemeni conflict evolved through three stages. From the start of open internecine warfare on 13 January to the evacuation of most Soviet and East European personnel by 22 January, when government forces appeared to have an edge in the fighting, the Soviets pursued a careful two-track policy. In public, the Soviets maintained their support for Hasani's government:

- Soviet media noted that the coup plotters had been executed, labeled the rebels as "putschists," and reported that the armed forces had "remained faithful" to the government.
- Soviet diplomats favored a cease-fire in order to limit the bloodletting in the Arab world's only Marxist regime. TASS noted that steps were underway to end the fighting.
- A high-level South Yemeni delegation, headed by two Hasani loyalists, arrived in Moscow on 17 January and held talks with General Secretary Gorbachev, Politburo member Ligachev and former candidate member Ponomarev.

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The most important Soviet activity during this period consisted of evacuating Soviet and East European citizens on more

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than 20 Soviet civil air flights between Moscow and Djibouti. Several of these flights carried "humanitarian" aid into Aden, but these flights may also have carried arms and ammunition for Soviet personnel to protect the Soviet embassy and facilities in Aden. The embassy and the Soviet Sigint facility near Aden were shelled during the fighting in this stage, and the Soviets suffered as many as 50 casualties. Soviet caution in this stage suggested that Moscow was covering its bets as long as Hasani remained in control, but would not be unhappy with the prospect of his being defeated. [REDACTED]

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The second stage of Soviet involvement began around 22-23 January [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] This stage continued until late February, when the rebel forces had established military control over most of South Yemen. [REDACTED]

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No Soviet ships or military aircraft arrived in South Yemen following completion of the evacuation effort, which makes any significant delivery of Soviet weapons to rebel forces unlikely during this second stage. [REDACTED]

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It was during this period that the Soviets used their leverage with Ethiopia and North Yemen to try to prevent any delivery of military assistance to Hasani's loyalist forces. Soviet media began to back away from earlier suggestions that government forces were gaining the upper hand, and privately Soviet officials were telling Western diplomats in Ethiopia and North Yemen that Hasani had been defeated and Moscow was now dealing with the "winners."

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In addition to providing tactical support to the rebels, the Soviets began their own direct pressure tactics to prevent outside involvement. Soviet First Deputy Foreign Minister Mal'tsev arrived in Sanaa on 30 January

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Mengistu also was persuaded not to assist Hasani despite the close relations that had developed between the two leaders over the past several years. Soviet pressure was instrumental in Mengistu's withdrawal of an offer of asylum to Hasani as well, which indicated that Moscow had decided that the rebels would win and preferred Hasani's ouster.

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The third stage is ongoing with the Soviets trying to cope with a new government in Aden that has ushered in a new and unpredictable era in Soviet relations with South Yemen. We believe that Soviet policy from the outset was designed to protect Moscow's stake in South Yemen with no apparent concern for Hasani's political survival or the impact of Soviet behavior on such regional Soviet clients as Ethiopia and North Yemen. But the new regime has failed to consolidate power or gain domestic support. The security situation in Aden remains unstable, with government troops committing violent acts against the population and forced recruitment creating disarray in the countryside. Curfew violators are being shot on sight

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The Soviet Bloc has extended formal diplomatic relations to the new regime but, with a South Yemeni government preoccupied with infighting and factionalism, no strong leader has emerged, and Soviet media commentary on the situation in Aden has become less frequent. TASS gave only limited coverage to the 3 March meeting between the South Yemeni delegation to the Soviet 27th party congress and Politburo members Ligachev and Aliyev. The Soviets have never acknowledged Gorbachev's meeting with the South Yemeni leaders during the congress, which indicates that Moscow is downplaying its support to the new regime. Sparse media commentary suggests that Moscow wants to distance itself from the current government until the situation is under control and from any connection to the Hasani overthrow. Moscow also is trying to encourage a "national reconciliation" government by urging Aden to bring moderates into the coalition and continuing Hasani's policy of a limited rapprochement with Aden's neighbors. [redacted]

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Meanwhile, the Soviets are taking their own steps to improve relations with Aden's neighbors who had been the targets of Soviet pressure tactics during the upheaval. [redacted]

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[redacted] a Soviet delegation arrived in North Yemen in early March with offers of increased economic assistance and cooperation, and offered to reconsider past Yemeni requests for increased military aid, including advanced Soviet equipment. The Soviets presumably will have to do at least as much for Ethiopian leader Mengistu, who continues to believe that Hasani enjoys broad popular support in the PDKY and only reluctantly agreed to withhold assistance from the South Yemeni leader following a great deal of Soviet pressure. [redacted]

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#### Outcome for the USSR

There are several levels on which the outcome of Soviet military and political involvement in the South Yemeni conflict should be evaluated. The first is the tactical military level or the Soviet contribution to the military performance and overall success of the South Yemeni rebels. Piecemeal Soviet assistance to the South Yemeni rebels was neither decisive in the outcome nor comparable to the broad-gauged Soviet role in North Yemeni's civil war in the 1960s or in Angola and Ethiopia in the 1970s, when Soviet clients faced very serious possibility of defeat without timely and well-structured Soviet assistance. Nevertheless, the Soviet political campaign that limited North Yemeni involvement and prevented Ethiopian military support for

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Hasani, as well as the USSR's direct military intervention on behalf of the rebel forces, certainly contributed to success for radical Marxist and fervently pro-Soviet forces. At the party congress in Moscow on 5 March, high-ranking South Yemeni party officials publicly praised "socialist and proletarian internationalism" (with its implied right of Soviet intervention to maintain a country's socialist orientation). [REDACTED]

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The political and diplomatic outcome for the Soviets is far more ambiguous than the military record. Moscow's relationship with Abd al-Fatah Ismail, who had led the most radical and pro-Soviet faction in South Yemeni politics for the past two decades, was always troublesome to the more "moderate" elements in the South Yemeni leadership, and his ouster from the country in 1980 over Soviet protests left the government in the hands of more pragmatic leaders who were less willing to accept a close embrace from Moscow. Ismail was responsible for the war that broke out on the North Yemen-South Yemen border in 1979, favored the establishment of a vanguard party on the Soviet model, and apparently was involved in the assassination of the President of North Yemen in 1978. [REDACTED]

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Ismail's return to Aden in 1985 following five years in exile in Moscow not only aroused suspicions of Aden's "moderates" but appears to have convinced most of South Yemen's neighbors that the USSR had decided to lend support to a radical faction in order to keep Hasani in check.\* It is not certain that the Soviets actually wanted Ismail to regain power in Aden, but Ismail's radicalism had disrupted the country before and they presumably realized that his return to Aden would increase factionalism and tensions within the leadership. [REDACTED]

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\*Nearly ten years ago, there were similar factional strains within the MPLA leadership in Angola with the leader of one faction, Nito Alves, favoring a more pro-Soviet and anti-Western line than that pursued by MPLA Chief Agostinho Neto who was considered more moderate than his rivals. Alves' armed bid for power in 1977 failed and there is no indication that the Soviet media ever criticized Alves' attempted coup. On the other hand, Cuban troops directly participated in suppressing the pro-Soviet Alves forces, possibly playing a crucial role. Soviet and Cuban interests have been on opposite sides in factional struggles in Ethiopia and more recently in Grenada as well.

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Regardless of Moscow's intentions, the USSR's long-term relationship with Ismail and its withdrawal of support from Hasani during the crisis have raised new suspicions about Soviet goals and intentions in the region. Mengistu, in particular, is concerned that Moscow's opportunism and lack of commitment to an ally who generally followed the Soviet line could leave the Ethiopian leader vulnerable to a Soviet supported challenge from ideologues within his Soviet-inspired vanguard party. [redacted]

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[redacted] The recent North Yemeni expulsion of the senior Soviet military adviser in Sanaa and the deputy military attache is almost certainly linked to events in Aden, particularly an effort to limit Moscow's ability to monitor any North Yemeni arms deliveries to Hasani forces. [redacted]

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The reaction of the Arab states--both moderate and radical--has been generally negative:

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- Syrian President Assad believes that Moscow bears a heavy responsibility for its support of the rebel forces and for the large number of casualties in Aden.

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- Libyan President Qadhafi had offered to intervene on Hasani's behalf early in the crisis, which initially complicated Moscow's efforts to contain the situation, and the confrontation could reinforce Tripoli's interest in limiting Soviet involvement in Libya's military and civilian bureaucracies. [redacted]

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- Oman and the UAE are likely to push back the timetable for the exchange of diplomatic missions with the USSR following the establishment of relations last year. Other Arab states which may have been considering establishing ties with the USSR, such as Bahrain and Qatar, presumably would delay these decisions even further.

If the current government in Aden decides to reinstate the hardline policy of the 1970s toward its moderate neighbors, then Soviet relations would deteriorate with the very states it is trying to cultivate, particularly North Yemen, Oman, and Saudi Arabia. The Soviets presumably are pleased that the rebel government has named a moderate such as Attas as President but he appears largely to be a figurehead without any real power. [REDACTED]

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On balance, the results of recent events in South Yemen for the Soviets appear to be mixed. At the first level, Moscow has protected its stake in South Yemen, regardless of the political complexion of the government that eventually consolidates control, and it may have prevented a protracted civil war with even more bloodletting. Presumably any South Yemeni government will be dependent on Moscow for military and economic assistance and, in return, the Soviets will be able to maintain--and possibly enhance--their capacity to monitor US and Allied activities in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean. Increased Soviet access to South Yemeni facilities would probably focus on improving the naval reconnaissance capability--perhaps substituting TU-95 aircraft for IL-38s. Aden is unlikely to sign a formal basing agreement as the Soviets have sought in the past. In any event, the Soviets should remain reasonably well placed to assist their power projection into the Horn of Africa, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. [REDACTED]

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The Soviets will have more difficulty in trying to restore the balance that had previously existed under Hasani's rule between the radical and more pragmatic elements in the government. The Soviets have never been genuinely popular in South Yemen even when the pro-Soviet Ismail was president in the late 1970s. Soviet officials, particularly Karen Brutents of the Central Committee's International Department, were deeply involved in the establishment of the Yemeni Socialist Party in 1978, but the YSP was never able to eradicate the tribal influences in South Yemen that have kept the Soviets from

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establishing leverage over Aden's internal politics. Moscow's major agents of influence within the party, including Ismail, were killed during the protracted fighting following the coup.

[redacted]

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We expect a resurgence of tribalism in South Yemen that will work against Soviet interests and weaken the YSP as a force for continuity in Yemeni politics. Tribal affiliations have always influenced the loyalties of Yemeni leaders more than ideology, and even regular military units tend to be dominated by a particular tribe. The recent fighting has worsened tribal divisions, and there are already indications that tribal and provincial politics will play a major destabilizing role in the months ahead. These tribal tensions, which could lead to additional assassination attempts and even low-level insurgency, probably explain the more recent Soviet efforts to distance Moscow from the government and to encourage consolidation of the YSP.

[redacted]

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Whatever the internal outcome, Soviet relations throughout the region could become more difficult. The Ethiopians and the North Yemenis are already openly suspicious of Moscow's behavior in the crisis, and the conservative Persian Gulf states are more convinced of the dangers of too great an opening to Moscow. Any increase in Aden's hostility toward the West and the Gulf will attract more attention to a possible direct Soviet role in the factionalism that led to the downfall of Hasani and his external policies. Any strains between Aden and its Arab neighbors will make it more difficult for the Soviets to extend their influence in the region.

[redacted]

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#### Implications for the United States

The factional strife between opposing cliques in South Yemen is typical of events in many Third World states where the Soviets have tried to extend their geopolitical reach. Over the past decade, the Soviets have taken advantage of the political and social vulnerabilities in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and South Yemen in order to gain additional access to naval and air facilities and to counter US facilities in the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. These regimes support Soviet foreign policy goals vis-a-vis the United States, such as opposition to US proposals to resolve the Arab-Israeli dispute and to the US CENTCOM as well as support for the Soviet presence in Afghanistan. The 1981 Tripartite or Aden Pact between Ethiopia,

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Libya, and South Yemen was orchestrated in part as a counter to US-sponsored agreements with Kenya, Oman, and Somalia. [REDACTED]

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Continued South Yemeni dependence on Soviet military assistance will, of course, work against any US efforts to open a diplomatic dialogue with Aden. Conversely, regional concerns with Soviet political and military actions in South Yemen have presented openings for the US in discussions with North Yemen and such Gulf states as Oman, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates. The states of the Gulf Cooperation Council have expressed their opposition to the Soviet role in South Yemen. Any tension between Ethiopia and the new regime in Aden favors US policy interests in the region. [REDACTED]

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A more radical successor state in Aden may not be entirely in Soviet interests but such a development could create problems for US interests in the region if it led to increased military access for the Soviets, closer ties with Iran, Libya, and Syria, and efforts to undermine moderate regimes on the peninsula. These moderate regimes could come to believe, however, that Moscow's sponsorship of Ismail's return to Aden in 1985 was designed as a means to ensure Hasani's fidelity to a pro-Soviet orientation and ultimately set in motion the violent events of the past two months. If so, the US could demonstrate the contradiction between Moscow's support for radicalism in South Yemen and its efforts to improve state-to-state ties with Aden's more conservative neighbors. As long as it is perceived that Ismail's return from Moscow set the stage for South Yemen's bloody civil war--regardless of Soviet intentions--the United States will have certain diplomatic openings. [REDACTED]

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